

Harbor Hills Housing Project
26607 Western Avenue
Lomita
Los Angeles County
California

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

**Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107**

Historic American Buildings Survey

Harbor Hills Housing Project

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HABS No. CA-2695

Location: 26607 Western Avenue (southwestern and southeastern corners of Western Avenue and Palos Verdes Drive)
Lomita, Los Angeles County CA
USGS Torrance Calif., Quadrangle (7.5 minute)
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: (Zone 11) 378900E/3738300N

Significance: The Harbor Hills Housing Project is significant as an important representative example of the role the federal and local government played in providing low income rental housing during the Great Depression. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was created by the National Housing Act of 1934 to encourage the revitalization of a national housing industry battered by the effects of the Depression.

Harbor Hills is also significant for its architectural design and site planning. The Chief Architect for the project was Reginald D. Johnson, with assistance provided by AC Zimmerman, Eugene Weston, Jr., Lewis E. Wilson and Donald B. Parkinson. The landscape plan was designed by Katherine Bashford and Fred Barlow, with Clarence Stein credited as a consulting architect.

Johnson is widely noted as one of Southern California's premier designers in the period revival styles of the 1920s, and also frequently cited in connection with his partnership with Gordon Kaufmann and Roland Coate. He later established a reputation as an innovator in modern site planning, both for his collaboration in this project and the Baldwin Hills Village project (1940). The Baldwin Hills project is listed on the NRHP.

According to Alson Clark, in his essay "Reginald D. Johnson: Regionalism and Recognition,"

... his most significant government housing, of which he was chief architect (with the offices of A.C. Zimmerman, Eugene Weston, Jr., Lewis E. Wilson, and Donald B. Parkinson collaborating) was the three-hundred unit Harbor Hills project at San Pedro, completed in 1941. Johnson even managed to get Katherine Bashford, with whom he had worked on many mansions, such as the Bauer house in Pasadena, appointed landscape architect at Harbor Hills. *California Arts and Architecture* called the project 'one of the most attractive in the country.' (Newland, 1992: 25)

Donald Parkinson is also notable as a principal in the important regional architectural firm of Parkinson and Parkinson, founded by his father John L. Parkinson.

Clarence Stein's involvement with this project is particularly notable. Stein figures as one of the nation's most influential city planners during this era. Along with Henry Wright, Stein pioneered the "superblock" concept of development, which broke from the earlier model of urban development by segregating automobile and residential traffic and orienting residential units onto common landscaped areas. Most frequently cited as path-breaking efforts in this regard are Stein and Wright's plans for Sunnyside on Long Island, and Radburn, New Jersey. Stein's superblock concepts can be seen as much in evidence at the Harbor Hills development, though it is difficult at this time to accurately assign the site planning credit entirely to either Stein, Johnson, or any of the other collaborating architects.

Description: Located on both the north and south sides of Palos Verdes Drive at Western Avenue, the 300 multiple family residential units are sited on terraced hillsides with asymmetrical layouts designed to take advantage of the hillside location. Curved walkways and landscaped open areas combined with segregated areas for parking allow for these dwellings to be surrounded by green open spaces, each with views onto the common grounds. The site planning orients the buildings at a forty-five degree angle to the public street and either parallel or perpendicular to each other. The site is pierced by six dead-end "motor courts" (parking lots), accessed from Western Avenue and Palos Verdes Drive.

Three distinct building plans have been employed in the development. All are two story, or one and two story, rectangular plan blocks, with multi-paned casement windows organized in horizontal bands. The exterior building walls are constructed of rather short, "groutlock" bricks with split-faced block accents, emphasizing the overall horizontality of the designs. The predominant building is a six unit "townhouse" style plan, two-stories in height, with very low-pitched concrete slab gable roofs (almost flat) with broad overhanging eaves. The building corners are pierced by multi-paned casement windows. The entrances have flat overhanging roofs with concrete stoops and curved pipe balustrades. These units are oriented towards the interior of the development, away from the public streets.

The second-most numerous plan used in the development are very similar in design to the two-story units, but feature a one-story step-down at one end. These five dwelling unit buildings are oriented towards the exterior bounding streets, and establish a reduced scale streetscape element. The third building type, and the least numerous, are the two-story walk-up flats. They are stylistically similar to the other units, but feature full-front attached balconies and concrete stairways attached to the balconies, placed perpendicular to the body of the building. The balconies and stairways feature curved pipe rails and balusters with wire-screen inserts, lending a modest Streamline Moderne flavor to these units.

The administrative office is located at the northwestern corner of Western Avenue and Palos Verdes Street. It is one-story in height, with an L-plan opening to the intersection, and low, intersecting gable roofs with very shallow eaves. It is stylistically dissimilar to the residential buildings, and appears to be an original building substantially altered at a later date. A number of original red brick trash incinerators with tall brick chimneys are scattered throughout the site.

The design integrity of the Harbor Hills development appears to be excellent overall. The buildings themselves are remarkably intact, and exhibit only minor alterations resulting from the addition of electrical meters and conduits to the building exteriors. The buildings were originally painted in pastel colors (light green, light apricot, soft yellow and eggshell). A different color scheme is in use today. The visual evidence of the original site planning, including the landscape plan, chainlink fencing, concrete pathways, and auto courts are entirely intact and in excellent condition.

Historical Context: Constructed in 1940-41, Harbor Hills was the second public housing project built by the Los Angeles County Housing Authority during the pre-war era (the first was Carmelitos in Long Beach). Funding for both of these projects were underwritten by the FHA. To finance such large public housing projects (300 units in Harbor Hills and 600 in Carmelitos), the federal government either jointly sponsored a loan with private lenders, or issued bonds.

Included in the FHA mandate was the construction of new single family dwellings, the repair of existing housing, and the construction of new multiple family housing. The principal focus of the FHA, even prior to World War II, but particularly afterwards, was on the construction of new single family residences — funding multiple family residential construction was (or rapidly became) a secondary priority for the agency.

Notably, the majority of the FHA's efforts in the area of multi-family construction was in assisting with the development of privately owned and built projects. Public housing was relatively rare in the United States during this period, particularly in comparison to European nations, where such developments were regarded as routine. Hundreds of FHA-financed projects were built throughout the United States, including several in Los Angeles County.

Sources: "A New FHA Low Cost Housing Plan." *Architectural Forum*, November, 1935.

Coliformio Arts & Architecture, July, 1941.

Gallion, Arthur & Eisner, Simon. *The Urban Pattern, City Planning and Design*. New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1975.

Newland, Joseph, ed. *Johnson, Koufman, Coote, Partners in the Coliformio Style*. Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1992.

Project Information: This documentation has been prepared pursuant to Stipulation 2 of a Memorandum of Agreement between the County of Los Angeles and the California Office of Historic Preservation regarding rehabilitation activities occurring at the Harbor Hills Housing Project. This undertaking will result in the replacement of the original multipaned steel casement windows with contemporary sliding aluminum units. The public agency responsible for Section 106 compliance is the Los Angeles Community Development Commission (LACDC), 2 Coral Circle, Monterey Park CA, 91755. The written documentation was prepared by San Buenaventura Research Associates (SBRA), 1328 Woodland Drive, Santa Paula CA, 93060, under contract to LACDC. The description, significance and context discussion is based upon research conducted by SBRA in June 1996 in connection with a Section 106 evaluation of the property. The authors are Judith P. Triem, historian, and Mitchel R. Stone, preservation planner. The photographic documentation was completed by Michael Moore, PO Box 271, Santa Paula CA, 93060, under the supervision of SBRA.